

# Pre-Surgery Tips



## Tip #1: Treat yourself (you deserve it!)

Considering you may not be able to move your arms as freely, why not book in for a beautiful blow-dry the day before your surgery as a special treat. Alternatively, you can ask a friend or family member to braid or plait your hair prior to surgery to ensure it is kept out of the way. Dry shampoo is also a lifesaver for dirty, dishevelled hair after surgery and can refresh your hair in an instant – pick up a can from your local supermarket for under \$10.

If you usually shave or wax your body hair, make sure you do it at least a week before your surgery. Avoid shaving or waxing right before or after your surgery, since small cuts from shaving or waxing may increase the risk of infection.

Also, make sure your fake/false nails are removed prior to surgery. Your best bet is to have a nice, clean, natural manicure (no polish) and beautiful hand cream so you can slather on post-surgery. Face wipes are also a girl's best friend for when you want to feel clean in an instant!

Lastly, take the time to do something you love. Whether it be going out and exploring, pampering yourself or staying in and watching movie. Recovery can take its toll on you, mentally and physically, so self-care is important.

## Tip #2: Charged up!

Is there anything more frustrating than a dying phone battery? After surgery, you might get lots of calls, well wishes, and check-in messages (remember, you don't have to reply if you don't feel up to it). You may also spend a lot of time on your phone. The most popular must-have is an extra-long phone charger or an extension cord. You can pick these up at your local Target, Kmart or JB HiFi for under \$30, so you can easily use your phone while it charges.

Don't forget to bring the charger for extra electrical devices (iPad, iPod, AirPods) and a laptop if you are up to watching movies – we also suggest uploading some favourite movies beforehand.

Remember to put your devices in a drawer when you are sleeping or going for a walk.

## Tip #3: Get stocked up (go shopping!)

Before surgery, make sure you have all the supplies you need to help you recover at home.

This includes filling any prescriptions (like for HRT) and having other medications on hand, such as laxatives (pain medications can cause constipation), ibuprofen, Panadol, lozenges, and cough medicine (coughing



can be painful after surgery). You might also need TUMS or peppermint sweets for a bloated stomach, a heat pack, and sanitary napkins for both the hospital and home (there can be light spotting after gynaecologic surgery).

You might also consider getting post-scar treatment (though you won't need this until your tape or bandages are removed) and spare dressings (but sometimes you won't need these as your surgeon will remove them at your first follow-up appointment).

Consider sourcing a plastic garden chair, which can be useful in the shower for the first week after surgery. A small fan for your bedroom at night can also help with any potential night sweats.

Pillows are a must, and lots are needed for during your recovery (minimum six). You will find you need about four pillows behind you and one on each side to rest your arms, and some people highly recommend a body pillow. You will also need a pillow for the seatbelt when travelling home in the car. You may also consider buying a wedge pillow for when you return from hospital.

Ensure that you have lots of loose-fitting clothing as you may be bloated after the surgery. This could be tracksuit pants or loose yoga pants (with pockets!), and zip-up hoodies or button-down shirts. If you have open surgery, you may find jeans more comfortable after a few days at home as they support your stomach area. If you have private health insurance, post-mastectomy bras may be covered so investigate this before your surgery.

## Tip #4: Preparing for coming home in advance

Before your surgery, make a list of everything you'll need. Since you won't be able to do much during the first few weeks after surgery, preparing everything in advance can be really helpful for your recovery. Plus, getting ready now can help relieve anxiety and pre-surgery nerves!

- Stock your fridge: Cook and freeze some meals or buy pre-prepared ones for when you return home, or for family to bring to you, instead of relying on hospital food.
- Fill your pantry: Stock up on easy-to-prepare and healthy foods to avoid the hassle of cooking, as reaching and lifting will be difficult in the first week. If you have kids, consider preparing and freezing their lunches and snacks too.
- Rearrange your cupboards: Specifically in your kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, move essential items to lower shelves since you won't be able to reach up high.
- Pay bills and fill up your car: Take care of any bills and put petrol in your car(s) in advance.
- Deep clean your house: Do a thorough clean – mop floors, vacuum, scrub bathrooms, etc. (as you won't be able to do these chores for a few weeks).
- Set up childcare: Make arrangements for a few weeks and ensure all school notes are signed.



- **Get a lift:** Arrange for someone to drive you to appointments, and to take your children to school and activities, as you won't be able to drive until your doctor gives the okay (usually after four weeks).
- **Book paid help:** Consider hiring a weekly house cleaner or make a chart for family and friends to divide tasks like driving, laundry, grocery shopping, ironing, cleaning, and cooking.

It can be really helpful to create a contact list of family and friends and note what each person has offered to help with. This way, the person looking after your family while you're in hospital will have a list of people to call for assistance, such as picking up and dropping off children at school and activities, or picking up groceries and supplies.

### **Tip #5: Deal with pre-surgery nerves**

It's normal to feel nervous before surgery and to have doubts and fears. Focusing on why you made the decision and the relief you'll feel once the surgery is over can be comforting. Remember, waiting is often the hardest part.

Treat yourself to things that help you relax and feel pampered. Consider a massage, a spiritual or energy treatment like reiki, beauty treatments such as waxing or eyelash tinting, or a hair treatment (wash your hair before going into hospital since it will be a few days before you can shower). You might also enjoy a nice lunch with your partner or a friend.

If you are having a mastectomy, throw a "boob-voyage" party! It can add a fun twist to what can be a challenging experience.

If you are having a hysterectomy or oophorectomy, take a moment to celebrate your last period. It might sound odd, but acknowledging, celebrating or farewelling your last period can be part of your process in making a significant change to your body.

Many women also find it helpful to keep a journal throughout the surgery and recovery. It's a great way to reflect on your progress and see how far you've come.

### **Tip #6: Telling family, friends and employers**

Everyone handles sharing news about surgery differently, so choose a method and timing that feels right for you. Some people prefer to inform others early on, while others wait until closer to the surgery date. Consider telling family and friends in stages, starting with those closest to you who offer unconditional support. While support is crucial, dealing with months of well-meaning questions can be emotionally exhausting. Keep in mind that people will react in various ways and may not always know how to support you.

Also, ask your surgeon how much time you'll need off work (which will vary depending on your job and the type of surgery). Generally, you should plan for at least three weeks, though open surgery may require a longer recovery time.



## Tip #7: Prop yourself up (find your supports!)

Decide who should be on your support team – consider family members, friends, and people from patient organisations and communities like Inherited Cancers Australia. Make sure everyone on your team is informed and ready to help. People can't support you if they don't know what's happening in your life.

Reach out to support groups – many organisations offer online support groups, and contacting different hospitals might lead to a referral for a face-to-face support group. Just keep in mind that there is support available, and you don't have to go through this alone.

## Tip #8: Be the best you that you can be

In the lead-up to surgery, think about what habits you might need to change to get your body in the best shape for recovery.

- Improve your physical fitness: stop smoking, cut down or quit drinking alcohol, lose weight, and exercise.
- Improve core strength: a strong core helps with getting in and out of bed when you can't use your arms for support.

- If you are having gynaecological surgery such as a hysterectomy, pelvic floor exercises can enhance your pelvic muscle strength, accelerate your recovery, and reduce the risk of common issues like vaginal prolapses or bladder control problems. It may be beneficial to consult a physiotherapist, who can provide you with a range of exercises and ensure that you're performing them correctly.
- Book an appointment with your chiropractor or physiotherapist if you think they can help you.
- Get a blood test: check with your GP for iron, vitamin levels, and other needs, and take supplements if necessary.
- Stay motivated: focus on your inherited cancer risk or gene mutation and the decision to have risk-reduction surgery as a source of strength.

## Tip #9: Set expectations – returning to physical activity

Most surgeons have their own protocols for returning to physical activity, so it's important to have honest and open discussions with your surgeon before surgery to set clear expectations about how soon you can get back to your normal routine.





Women who are fit and active before surgery usually have a strong starting point, and most can return to their pre-surgery exercise routines. However, it may be more challenging and take longer for elite or highly athletic women to reach their previous activity levels. To help manage expectations, consider seeing a physiotherapist before surgery or in the early days after to establish a baseline for rebuilding strength.

Healing can take several months or longer, and returning to full strength requires patience as you monitor how your body reacts to different weights and movements. If you are having a mastectomy, recovery can also be affected by the placement of implants during reconstructive surgery and their impact on the pectoral muscles. Be sure to work through the phases of rehabilitation, focusing on posture, range of movement, and stability. Start with light weights and gradually increase as you progress.

### **Tip #10: Crack out the stationery**

Set up a medical folder to keep all related paperwork, such as reports, scans, bills, quotes, claim forms, and hospital admission documents. Include a summary page that outlines who has been paid, which Medicare and Private Health Fund claims have been submitted, and when those claims have been paid. Keeping copies of everything will help you follow up if a claim isn't paid. This folder will also help you keep track of your medical expenses.

When seeing your surgeon, bring a notebook and pen to take notes (or ask your support person to help). Organise your notebook into sections for different specialists, such as Breast Surgeon, Plastic Surgeon, and Medical Oncologist (if applicable).

### **Tip #11: Maximise your meeting time**

Each time you see a surgeon, make sure you have a list of questions written down, as it can be overwhelming. If possible, bring someone with you to the appointment. It can be difficult to process all the information on your own.

Ask for permission to record the meeting with your phone if you find it helpful. Also, request copies of all your results and keep them together in your medical folder.

Always research different surgery options and ask your surgeon to show you results from various types of surgery. If you're not happy with the advice you receive, don't hesitate to seek a second opinion.

When you arrive at the hospital, try to avoid paying for parking if possible, as it can be expensive. Arrive early to your first appointment to look for free parking. If you're travelling more than 100 kilometres, you may be eligible for reimbursement for petrol and accommodation.

If you're studying or working, remember to ask your surgeon for a medical certificate for your appointments or surgery.



## Tip #12: Prepare for a change of plans

Go into your surgery with the understanding that your surgeon may not be able to perform a laparoscopic procedure and might have to do an open surgery instead. For instance, surgeons may be unable to carry out a laparoscopy on women with high scar tissue adhesion from previous c-sections, but they won't know this until the procedure has started. Prepare yourself for this possibility so you won't be caught off guard.

Since recovery from open surgery takes longer, plan to take extra time off work and home responsibilities to ensure a full recovery. It can be helpful to prepare as if you're having open surgery, setting up all necessary systems and support. You can then adjust these preparations if the laparoscopic procedure goes ahead as planned.

## Tip #13: Develop your plan for surgical menopause (if applicable)

If you are having your ovaries removed, you will enter surgical menopause. While reducing or treating ovarian cancer risk is the highest priority, it's important to educate and prepare yourself for surgical menopause. This may not happen immediately (for some women, it takes a few weeks to begin), and you might experience some (or none) of the following menopause side effects:

- Cardiovascular problems
- Osteoporosis/bone loss
- Hot flashes
- Fatigue/less energy
- Joint and bone pain, arthritis
- Memory loss
- Lack of libido
- Vaginal dryness
- Night sweats
- Lack of sleep/insomnia
- Mood swings, such as impatience or anger
- Weight gain
- Hair thinning or fine facial hair
- Drier skin

Consider organising the following to help manage your surgical menopause:

- HRT: Discuss surgical menopause, associated risks, and which hormone replacement therapy (HRT) medications are suitable with your doctor. Your genetic status, family history, the type of surgery (e.g., just ovaries or full hysterectomy), and previous breast surgery (mastectomy) will all impact your HRT recommendations. If prescribed HRT, ensure you have the prescriptions filled.
- Herbal medicine: If you choose not to use HRT, consider herbal supplements to help with menopause side effects.
- Osteoporosis: Think about taking supplements like calcium and vitamin D for bone density.
- Pain relief: Consider using fish oil for bone and arthritis-related aches or exploring acupuncture.



- Vaginal lubricants: Purchase lubricants as needed, such as KY or PJUR for women.
- Sleeping tablets: Ask your doctor for a prescription and get it filled.
- Drink water: Staying hydrated can help manage hot flushes.
- Fan: A small fan in your bedroom can be helpful for night sweats.
- Layers of clothing: Wear layers to easily remove them during hot flushes.
- Stress: Stress can trigger or increase hot flushes, so develop a strategy to manage your stress levels.
- Diet and exercise: To prevent weight gain, aim for a balanced diet and regular exercise. Weight-bearing exercises can strengthen bones, and some women find it helps reduce hot flushes. Be mindful that alcohol and certain foods (like spicy dishes) may trigger hot flushes, so try to identify and avoid them.
- Your emotions: You may feel very emotional after your oophorectomy due to grief over not being able to conceive or have children, which can combine with menopause side effects to make you feel overwhelmed. Don't hesitate to talk to your doctor for help and support.